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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KWBG](#) [EG](#) [IR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: PROBABLE NEW ISRAELI DEFENSE MINISTER'S HARDLINE
VIEWS ON THE PALESTINIANS, IRAN, AND SYRIA

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (S) Summary. Former IDF Chief of General Staff Boogie Ya'alon is widely expected to be Bibi Netanyahu's Defense Minister in the government that Netanyahu will likely announce next week. Ya'alon is something of a political enigma in Israel since he has roots in the left but has become known for his hardline views on Israel's security needs and what he sees as the current impossibility of peace with the Palestinians. Ya'alon is said to have a difficult relationship with the current IDF Chief of General Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, but they share a tough view of the IDF's responsibility to take military action if necessary to stop Iran's development of a nuclear weapon. While some in the Israeli peace camp think Ya'alon may show flexibility toward restrictions on Palestinian movement and access in the West Bank, others recall that he was the driving force behind Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, and predict that he will limit Netanyahu's flexibility. We also anticipate that Ya'alon will adopt an even tougher posture toward Gaza than Ehud Barak. End summary.

12. (C) According to most Israeli accounts, former IDF Chief of General Staff, Lt General (res) Moshe (Boogie) Ya'alon is Prime Minister-designate Netanyahu's leading choice as Minister of Defense. Ya'alon is something of a political enigma since he grew up on a kibbutz and has roots in the political left, but is known for his hardline views on Israel's security, including a strong conviction that further territorial withdrawals would threaten Israel's survival. In a conversation with PolCouns last year, Ya'alon said Israelis must be prepared for at least another generation of intermittent warfare since he believes that most Palestinians do not accept Israel's existence and believe that constant pressure, including terrorism, will eventually force Israel to collapse. Ya'alon said the perception among many Arabs that Iran is the rising regional power, along with an Arab education system and media that inculcates the view that Israel even within the 1967 borders is illegitimate and must disappear, make peace impossible in the near term. Ya'alon argued that any Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank under current conditions would only result in that territory becoming a staging area for attacks on Israel. During the campaign for the January 2009 elections, Ya'alon expressed opposition to possible Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights as well.

13. (C) Yair Hirschfeld, the founder of the Tel Aviv-based Economic Cooperation Foundation and one of the negotiators of the Oslo Agreements, has challenged Ya'alon in public debates about the peace process, but Hirschfeld was surprisingly

upbeat March 12 about a phone conversation he had just held with Ya'alon. Hirschfeld told PolCouns that Ya'alon was heavily focused on the Iranian threat, but also interested in exploring whether Israel could develop a common approach toward Iran with Egypt, Turkey and other regional states. Hirschfeld said Ya'alon is opposed to pursuing permanent status negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, but largely because Ya'alon mistakenly believes that permanent status negotiations would necessarily lead to near-term IDF withdrawal from the West Bank.

¶4. (C) Hirschfeld's positive assessment of the conversation was based on Ya'alon's comment that, as Defense Minister, he would be willing to consider any reasonable proposal from ECF for ways to reduce obstacles to Palestinian movement in the West Bank and would strongly support a bottom-up approach to developing the Palestinian security services and governing institutions as long as the IDF retained overall security responsibility. Hirschfeld also noted that while Ya'alon is a security hardliner, he has no ideological or emotional commitment to the settlement enterprise. Ya'alon and Hirschfeld agreed that Netanyahu's government should focus on changing Palestinian attitudes by making the West Bank a model that Gazans will want to emulate.

¶5. (C) Former Deputy Defense Minister Efraim Sneh offered a more pessimistic view of Ya'alon's attitudes during a March 13 meeting with the Ambassador. Sneh described Ya'alon as a likely obstacle to Netanyahu's ability to adopt a flexible approach toward the West Bank, although Sneh conceded the Ya'alon would likely support efforts to improve the quality of life for Palestinians on the West Bank. Sneh said that as commander of the West Bank during the Second Intifada, Ya'alon was insistent on the need to impose tough military measures to control Palestinian movement and access. In contrast to Hirschfeld's comments, Sneh said Ya'alon was solicitous of the security concerns of the West Bank settlers, who often quoted him when discussing security issues with the Ministry of Defense. Sneh also described Ya'alon as "uncorruptable;" Netanyahu would not be able to buy his support by offering him budgetary benefits or parliamentary perquisites.

¶6. (S) Comment: Ya'alon's abilities as a soldier and commander are respected in the IDF, but he is known not to have an easy relationship with Chief of General Staff Lt General Gabi Ashkenazi. Ashkenazi served as Ya'alon's deputy when Ya'alon was Chief of General Staff. Ashkenazi has been quoted in the press as saying that an Israeli defense minister should have political experience, perhaps reflecting a concern that Ya'alon will be less politically adept than Barak and more inclined to intervene in strictly military matters. Ya'alon published a book last year in which he harshly attacked his successor as IDF Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz, who had already resigned due to the perceived command failures in the Second Lebanon War. PM Olmert and others have publicly questioned the professionalism of Ya'alon's scornful references to Halutz in the book. Ashkenazi and Ya'alon have a common view of the need for Israel to take military action, alone if necessary, if economic pressures fail to stop Iran's nuclear program. Ya'alon's hostility to Hamas and record of aggressive responses to terrorism likely portend a harsh posture toward Gaza, both with regard to possible further Israeli military action and in terms of his likely views on supporting humanitarian relief efforts.

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